

1 Integrating technology

I am a firm believer that in order for learning technology to be successful, it should be integrated into the curriculum. According to a report published by the educational community Edutopia, this must happen ‘in ways that research shows deepen and enhance the learning process’, and ‘in particular, it must support four key components of learning: active engagement, participation in groups, frequent interaction and feedback, and connection to real-world experts’ (Edutopia, 2008).

Technology should always be part of what a teacher is currently doing with a class, and only be used to promote and extend learning. It shouldn’t be something special, done as a break from regular classroom learning or as a reward for good behaviour. For this reason, whenever colleagues ask me for ideas on what to do in the computer room of our school, my first question to them is always, ‘What are you doing with the class at the moment?’ Once I have the answer to this question, then I can help them.

Of course, it’s not always clear that incorporating technology into the pedagogical goal is the right way of doing things. I would hazard a guess that every teacher attracted to using technology in the classroom has been tempted to try using a new tool they have come across, even if the added value of using that tool was dubious. This urge to experiment is understandable, given we live in an age where technological change is happening at breakneck speed. Son (2011) calls for teachers to ‘develop and implement CALL widely by exploring, selecting, using and evaluating the tools in a variety of contexts’, and perhaps it is the *evaluating* aspect that teachers need to concentrate more on, in order to ensure that technology is not used for technology’s sake.

So what comes first? Technology or learning objectives? The answer is, neither. The learners come first, and this is why one of the best ways of knowing if, and how much, technology should play a part in your class is by finding out from your learners their attitudes to using technology for language learning.

There are a couple of information-gathering activities in this chapter, but before you do these, you can simply ask your learners what they think of the idea of using more technology in class. If they are adults, perhaps the last thing they want to do after a long day sitting in front of screens at work is come to class and do the same! On the other hand, they may all have smartphones, and may appreciate their English teacher showing them how best to use them to practise English when they are commuting. Or you may teach teenagers who are bored with more traditional ways of learning English and who would be highly motivated by your spicing up your lesson with computers. What technology you use will also depend on what resources you, and your learners, have available. You may have an interactive whiteboard in the classroom, or a computer and a projector. If you are very lucky, you may have a class set of laptops, netbooks or tablets. In both of these cases, you will probably find yourself using technology in every class. You may have access to a computer room you need to book, or for which there is a sign-up sheet determining access. Your learners could all have smartphones, or other mobile devices, you can use. For this reason, determining what technology is at your disposal, and how you can make use of it (should you choose to do so), will be an important factor in deciding how to use technology in class.

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Whatever your access to technology, one of the obvious choices of tools a teacher has is of electronic dictionaries, as well as other tools specifically designed to support language learning, such as the thesaurus. Introducing learners to these tools, and showing them when and how to use them, can help them help themselves at a later date. There is a suggestion in this chapter for how to introduce learners to electronic dictionaries.

One way of integrating technology into a course is to adopt a blended-learning approach.

Blended learning here ‘refers to a language course which combines a face-to-face classroom component with an appropriate use of technology’ (Sharma & Barrett, 2007: 7), and this definition implies the learners use technology at home. Although many teachers will believe that blended learning refers to when a face-to-face component has been added to an online course (i.e. 90% online; 10% face-to-face), the term can refer to the opposite: an online component is added to a face-to-face course.

One of the best ways teachers can adopt this type of blended-learning approach, and ensure technology is integrated into a course, is by using a *Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)*. VLEs come in various shapes and forms. Another term for a VLE is *Learning Management System (LMS)*. The most popular ones are currently *Moodle* and *Blackboard*, and larger institutions will often have available a VLE that teachers and learners can use. If this is the case in your situation, and you have been avoiding the VLE, now may be the time to start using it. If you don’t have access to a VLE, then you can always set up your own for your learners to use, or (even better) talk to other teachers at your institution and set up one that can be used by a number of classes.

VLEs usually have tools that make it easy for teachers to see how often, and when, learners have accessed the system, and will let you set tests and record learner marks. Therefore, VLEs can be useful for assessment and evaluation.

VLEs, however, are very teacher-centric tools and don’t encourage lifelong learning or learner autonomy. Usually, once a learner has stopped studying a course, or attending a particular institution, he/she will no longer have access to the VLE. For this reason, a popular alternative to the VLE is the *Personal Learning Environment (PLE)*. Rather than asking learners to join an institution-owned platform, they can be encouraged to set up a number of tools of their own. You can find out more about the PLE in Chapter 2 *Building a learning community*.

One activity in this chapter looks at the *flipped classroom*, which is an interesting approach to classroom practice that suggests teachers reverse the usual teaching model by delivering instruction at home (often by using teacher-created videos) – allowing them to spend more time in class for practice, with the idea of creating a more collaborative learning environment. Although perhaps best suited to content subjects, the flipped classroom can be used by language teachers as an alternative, for occasional use.

Finally, a common obstacle to integrating technology into a language course can be a teacher’s fear of what to do if something goes wrong. A teacher using technology always needs to have a *Plan B* (i.e. a back-up plan). For this reason, an activity in this chapter looks at how best a teacher can prepare for the eventuality that the technology may not work as planned. Above all, this chapter is meant to be an introduction to integrating technology into the curriculum. Throughout the rest of the book, you will come across many more ideas for integrating technology, and for making teaching and learning English more meaningful and fun.

References

- Edutopia (2008) 'Why integrate technology into the curriculum?: The reasons are many', *Edutopia*. Available online at: <http://www.edutopia.org/technology-integration-introduction> [accessed March 2012].
- Sharma, P. and Barrett, B. (2007) *Blended Learning: Using Technology in and Beyond the Language Classroom*, Oxford: Macmillan Education.
- Son, J. B. (2011) 'Online tools for language teaching', *TESL-EJ*, 15 (1). Available online at: <http://www.tesl-ej.org/wordpress/issues/volume15/ej57/ej57int> [accessed March 2012].

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1.1 Getting to know you

Main goals	Ice-breaking
Level	All levels
Time	10 minutes
Learning focus	Review of question forms; basic structures
Preparation	Make sure all of the learners have mobile phones they can use in class. Write the names of everyone in the class on separate small pieces of paper.
Technical requirements	Mobile phones (one per learner) with voice recorders

Procedure

- 1 Hand out the pieces of paper with the learner names on them, one to each learner, and make sure nobody has their own name. Tell the learners that they are going to role play the part of a journalist and write a profile of the learner they have been assigned.
- 2 Ask the learners to take out their mobile phones and locate the voice recorder. Tell them that the first part of the profile is a description of the person, based on information they already have (this could be a physical description). Then ask the learners to record a description of their assigned learner, using the voice recorder.
- 3 Next, have the learners interview their assigned classmates. Tell them they can ask any questions they like, but they should find out as much as possible about the classmate, and record both the questions and answers on the voice recorder of their phone.
- 4 If learners find that the person they are going to interview is interviewing someone else, tell them they should wait their turn, listening to the interview.
- 5 When all of the interviews are finished, ask the learners to write the profiles of their classmates, starting with the description of the person, and then adding other information. They should aim to write about a paragraph.
- 6 Ask the learners not to transcribe the interview verbatim, but to use the answers to the questions to build a narrative (e.g. *Ruth lives in a small village, outside the city, etc.*).
- 7 When the profiles are finished, make a wall display in the classroom.

Variation

If the learners have applications for drawing on their phones, you can ask them to draw a quick sketch of their partner to go with the profile. Alternatively, you can ask the learners to take photographs with the mobile phones and print these out to go with the descriptions.

1.2 Technological survey

Main goals	Information gathering
Level	All levels
Time	10 minutes
Learning focus	Discovering experience with, and attitudes to, use of educational technology
Preparation	Choose a survey tool or questionnaire you can use to ask learners about the technology they use outside class, and their attitudes to using it. There are some suggestions of survey tools in Appendix B 1.2. Write down the questions you think are relevant to your class (see examples in Appendix B 1.2 – there are also some ready-made surveys you can use on the website accompanying this book, http://languagelearningtechnology.com).
Technical requirements	A computer room, or class set of laptops/netbooks/tablets. Alternatively, you can ask the learners to do the survey at home, or you can get an idea for how the class feels about using technology by using one computer and a projector (or IWB), and doing the survey as a whole-class activity. It is also possible, of course, to give the learners a photocopy of the questionnaire to fill in.

Procedure

- 1 Ask the learners how they feel about using technology in class, and get a feel for what they think it would be good to use it for and how often they think it should be used.
- 2 Ask the learners to complete the survey you have set up, or go through the questions and answer them in a whole-class setting. Here are some example questions:

Learning-technology survey

Part A – technology I use at home

- | | | |
|---|---|----------|
| 1 | I have a smartphone. | Yes / No |
| 2 | I use <i>Facebook</i> on a regular basis. | Yes / No |

Part B – technology for language learning

- | | | |
|---|--|----------|
| 1 | I would like to use my mobile phone for language learning. | Yes / No |
| 2 | I would be happy to use <i>Facebook</i> for language learning. | Yes / No |

- 3 Use the results of the survey to talk to your learners about how you plan to integrate technology into the syllabus.
- 4 Make sure to avoid using technology that some of your learners don't have access to (smartphones, for example), or to make this an optional part of whatever you do.

Variation

Learners work in pairs, or groups, and design their own survey, based on some example questions. They then change groups/pairs, interview each other and report the results to the whole class.

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1.3 Visual class list

Main goals	Classroom management
Level	All levels
Time	10 minutes
Learning focus	Getting to know each other better
Preparation	Make sure you have the digital camera at hand, and that you can transfer the pictures you take to the computer (via cable, or other method, e.g. memory card). This activity is best done at the beginning of the year.
Technical requirements	An IWB, or computer with projector, and a digital camera, or mobile phone camera

Procedure

- 1 Tell the learners you would like to take a photograph of them to display on the board as a visual class list. Use the digital camera, or give it to the learners to take a class photograph of each other.
- 2 Let the learners take several class pictures, until they are happy with the results. If the learners prefer, they could send you individual digital photographs, or choose an icon to represent themselves. However, one of the reasons for taking class photographs is so you and the other learners can get to know each other better.
- 3 Transfer the photographs to the computer, and add them to the IWB, or (if you don't have an IWB) to a document.
- 4 You can use the photographs of the learners as a class list, at the beginning of each class, marking the time that learners arrive (if punctuality is an issue). You can also use the photographs to arrange groupings of learners, more easily displaying the seating arrangements for each class so the learners know where to sit when they arrive.
- 5 With an IWB, you can also use the learner photographs as a marker for board games, and to identify learners during quizzes and other activities.

1.4 Favourite websites

Main goals	Needs analysis / information gathering
Level	All levels
Time	10 minutes
Learning focus	Thinking about using English outside of class
Preparation	Make photocopies of the form below.
Technical requirements	None

Procedure

- 1 Ask the learners if they know of any websites in English, and if so, to fill in a form (similar to that below) about the websites they visit. To help them, provide a list of categories, such as sports, music, technology, news, etc.

Website	Category	Address	Why I like it

- 2 Apart from using the information you get from the learners in future classes, you can also make it the basis of a discussion with them about their interests.

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1.5 Plan B

Main goals	Classroom management
Level	All levels
Time	Ongoing
Learning focus	Any
Preparation	Time to think about what you can do if the technology fails. See Appendix B 1.5 for help with specific contexts.
Technical requirements	None

Procedure

Before using a particular technology in class, think carefully what you will do if the technology doesn't work. Here are some ideas of what you can do:

- Ask your learners to help out if technology fails. Select a volunteer or two to help sort out the problem, while you conduct a discussion on 'Can we rely upon technology?' or 'What do you do when something goes wrong?'
- Have an alternative activity / lesson plan ready. Save what you had planned to do in this lesson for the next lesson.
- If using online video, play what you plan to play, all the way through, before class. This saves the file into a cache and means your learners won't need to wait for it to load.
- With online audio/video, try to download a copy to your computer so you don't have to rely on an internet connection. See Appendix B 1.5 for help with this.
- If you are using a video where there is a narrative storyline, another idea is to have photocopies of some screenshots of the video ready. You first describe what happens in the video, and then ask the learners to put the screenshots in order.

Note

Thanks to Sue Lyon-Jones of <http://www.esolcourses.com> for inspiring these ideas.

1.6 Our VLE

Main goals	Learner training; learner autonomy
Level	Elementary (A2) and above
Time	15 minutes
Learning focus	Encouraging homework and out-of-class communication
Preparation	If your institution has a VLE (<i>Virtual Learning Environment</i> , sometimes referred to as an LMS or CMS, i.e. <i>Language/Content Management System</i>), such as <i>Moodle</i> , <i>Blackboard</i> , etc., then use it for this activity. If not, choose a VLE from the list in Appendix B 1.6, and set up an account. Before doing so, make sure that using a VLE is acceptable with your institution. For obvious reasons, setting up the account is best done at the beginning of a course.
Technical requirements	A computer room, or class set of laptops/netbooks/tablets. Alternatively, you can use just one internet-enabled computer in the classroom, with a projector, to present the VLE, and the learners can access it outside of class.

Procedure

- 1 Tell the learners you are going to ask them to join a website and use it to submit homework for class. Tell them that they can also use the website as a way of communicating with you, and the other learners, between classes.
- 2 Introduce the learners to the features of the VLE you have chosen, and ask them to set up accounts (tell them to do this later if you are not using multiple computers in the classroom).

Features I recommend setting up on the VLE (they will obviously vary depending on the VLE you use) include:

Latest news: this is an area (usually a forum) where you can tell learners important news (inform them of homework, when exams are, etc.).

Learner blogs: learners can use these to write their written homework (unless you ask them to upload more formal documents).

Forums: you can have a number of these. One may be a Grammar Q & A, where learners can ask you questions.

Setting up these features depends on the VLE you choose, but you will be guided through the process on-screen, with drop-down menus you can choose.

- 3 Set the learners' first assignment. If this activity is done at the beginning of the course, then I suggest asking them to post an introduction in a forum, or on a blog. Ask the learners then to respond to these introductions, and you can also post messages responding to them, too.
- 4 Make sure you use the VLE regularly, refer to it in class and reward the learners who use it more frequently than others. Rewarding learners should encourage the others to use it more too.

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1.7 Dictionary race

Main goals	Learner training; learner autonomy
Level	Elementary (A2) and above
Time	15 minutes
Learning focus	Using electronic/online dictionaries
Preparation	Choose an electronic, or online, dictionary you want to recommend to the learners (see Appendix B 1.7 for some examples), and prepare a list of words and phrases suitable for your class.
Technical requirements	A computer room, or class set of laptops/netbooks/tablets. You can also encourage the learners to use dictionaries they might have on their phones. Alternatively, you can use just one internet-enabled computer in the classroom, with a projector, to model the use of electronic dictionaries, and encourage the learners to use the dictionaries outside of class.

Procedure

- 1 Ask the learners if they use electronic/online dictionaries and if so, ask them to tell you what they use them for. Here are some of the responses they may give you:

looking up words checking spelling checking grammar checking pronunciation finding synonyms

- 2 Tell the learners that they are going to try out a few electronic dictionaries (either ones they have on their mobile phone or others you recommend) and compare them to see which one(s) they prefer.
- 3 Ask the learners to work in pairs to look for the words/phrases you call out / write on the board and find definitions, pronunciation, etc. The first pair to define the word/phrase you call out wins a point. Alternatively, if you are using just one computer, ask for volunteers to take turns to use the dictionary. The other learners will follow along with the projected image.
- 4 After you have tried a few dictionaries, ask the learners which one(s) they preferred and why (easier to use, quicker, etc.).

Variation

With higher-level learners, you can challenge them to put the word/phrase into a sentence before they are awarded a point.